

Riding the crest of the wave

Having installed the first digital press just two years ago, Abbey Labels now has a second machine on the shop floor, with a third on order. *Neel Madsen* visited the family-owned company in Suffolk to hear why digital has become such a major part of its operations.

Abbey Labels has its origins in the production of continuous stationary. It was founded by current chairman Tom Allum's parents in 1982, and has since moving into labels in 1994 grown to become a leading trade printer, supplying BRC grade and ISO 14001 approved labels to the food, beverage, cosmetics, industrial, security and pharmaceutical industries.

The Bury St Edmunds business turned over £4.2 million last year and sales have grown by double-digit figures since the start. The company's first digital press, a Xeiikon 3300, was installed in the spring of 2013 along with an AB Graphic Digicon 2 finishing system. This investment was a reaction to a changing market and wanting to follow the company ethos of continual investment to further growth.

'About three or four years ago, the tide was beginning to turn,' explained Mr Allum. 'We were starting to lose the odd small four colour run and the market was changing for us. Customers were also increasingly asking for multiple sorts, so we decided to examine the potential for digital and the equipment available. Questions about the speed of digital devices, print quality, and the space required to set up a digital operation were constantly on our minds.'

Managing director Barry Pettit said, 'We began to struggle to compete on price for short run colour work, so we would outsource this work to our competitors that had already installed digital presses. After a period, we said 'Well we are sending quite a few out now so let's go for it.'

More fire power

But the story doesn't stop there. Digital production at Abbey Labels grew by 30% last year, and the increase this year is projected to be 23–25%. As the job queue was getting longer and longer, it became clear that more digital capacity was needed, and an in-depth study of the market leading technologies was undertaken. Although presses from other manufacturers were seriously considered, the company opted to have another Xeiikon 3300 installed right away, with a new faster Xeiikon CX3 on order for January next year.

'When we were looking to invest in our second and third digital presses, we needed quite a quick fix due to the amount our work we were getting. We just didn't have the time to invest in new technology and going through another learning curve,' said Mr Allum. 'We have found that Xeiikon as a company fits well with our business model and we feel comfortable with them.'

Mr Pettit added, 'We have also learnt lessons from flexo that once you are successful with one type of machine, it is wise to back it up with another of the same type. This allows greater flexibility when dealing with large numbers of orders.'



Abbey Labels has taken delivery of its second Xeiikon press and have a third on order

Strong studio

The print department is backed up by a well-established in-house studio that has had to change considerably to accommodate the dramatic increase in the number of jobs coming through the doors. Having talked to other print companies about their experiences before embarking of the digital adventure two years ago, Abbey Labels was well aware that the studio and the admin department could become bottlenecks if the right measures were not in place.

'Our studio has always been quite strong,' said Mr Allum. 'This stems from the days when we had a film origination business, Laser Graphics Services, which supplied films to other printers. When we amalgamated it into the group, the staff from there came to join Abbey Labels bringing a wealth of experience of handling multiple files and impositioning to the studio. We have always invested in our studio, because we found that if you have good software, not only will you produce the best print quality, you can also increase productivity (up to a point) without increasing the number of people.'

Getting local

Although traditionally a trade only printer, receiving most of the work through brokers, the company has been able to increase its share of end user customers since the installation of the digital press. This has particularly been by winning new local clients, perfect for the fast turnaround, short runs and multiple SKUs that digital offers. East Anglia is rich in small food companies and start-ups needing labels; a market where flexo just can't compete.

Adding digital print to our offering has really opened up the local market for us.

Mr Pettit said, 'We used to sell almost 100% of our labels through trade clients, but this has changed over the last couple of years. Digital has really opened up the local market for us. We were approached by businesses in the area when they discovered the opportunities that our digital capabilities could offer them. Although we still rely on trade for a large part of our business, the split has changed significantly.'

Today the split between trade and end user customers is 70/30. Mr Allum commented, 'Our business was built on trade and we will always respect the rules of trade by not approaching end users that our clients are already dealing with, but locally for us, it has been shown that there was a gap in the market. I can definitely see this market continuing to expand as we get our name out there more.'



Chairman Tom Allum (left) and managing director Barry Pettit are taking the company into new markets with digital

Still strong in flexo

Having gone down the digital route does not mean that the Abbey team has turned their backs on conventional printing. There are four flexo presses on the factory floor running to full capacity, showing no signs of decline in that side of the business.

'Back in 1996, we made the brave choice to invest in UV flexo when it was still in its infancy,' said Mr Pettit. Abbey was the first printer in the UK to buy an EM280 UV flexo press from Gallus, a machine which up until November last year was still running alongside three more Gallus presses, and a new 340 mm wide MPS EF eight colour UV flexo press, commissioned last September.

In the platemaking department stands an Esko CDI Spark 2530, which has recently been upgraded to HD Flexo, reducing time to make a plate from two hours to 40 minutes. There is also a suite of DuPont Cyrel Fast plate processing and exposure equipment, two FlexoWash machines, and a new platemounting machine from raantec GmbH.

Sharing and caring

With more capacity comes the need for more staff and the company has increased the workforce in the customer service, printing and finishing departments. This takes the total number of staff up to 36, many of whom have been with Abbey since the very beginning.

The modern, spacious sales and administration offices have just been restructured with a layout that encourages face to face communication. 'We are very open with our staff,' said Mr Allum. 'We try to foster close relationships both within the company and with our customers. Our staff know who the customers are, and we share all sales figures and plans, so everyone knows where we are and where we want to go. Working closely together also means that queries can be resolved quickly and efficiently. It all benefits the business.'

The company is also working closer with customers to offer the flexibility needed in today's fast turnaround market. Double day shifts have been introduced to meet these growing demands and to get the most out of the new digital presses.

With more presses, more growth will naturally follow for this experienced label printer. As Mr Allum put it, 'Yes two new digital presses in one year, as well as our new MPS flexo press, is quite a major investment in a relatively short space of time, but our experience of being in the print industry for a long time has put us in good stead. We've realised that the industry is on quite a crest of a wave at the moment, and we know that this is always the best time to invest.' •